

Fixing Men: Castration, Impotence, and Masculinity in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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This article examines the changing perceptions of ideal masculinity in post World War Two America. Ken Kesey, representative of a growing number of antagonistic male writers in the 1950s and 1960s, uses the mental ward in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as a microcosm for a contemporary society that he believes feminizes men by not allowing them an outlet for their primal sexual urges. Nurse Ratched—a sterile, distant, and oppressive feminine force who psychologically castrates the male patients—represents Kesey's fears of a cold war era that fosters an impotent, feminine American masculinity through a climate of fear and conformity. McMurphy's violence toward Ratched becomes analogous to a rape act, meant to free the inmates from an impotent manhood, but his subsequent lobotomy undermines the possibility that such a freedom can be obtained in such an environment.

Keywords: Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, cold war masculinity, sexuality, violence, oppression, feminization

Years after the publication of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in an essay entitled "On Editing Kesey: Confessions of a Straight Man," John Clark Pratt recounts an incident that occurred while he visited Kesey on the novelist's Oregon farm. Describing the difficulty he and Kesey were having controlling an evasive calf, Pratt writes,

As I threw myself at a galloping calf which was larger than the rest, Kesey yelled, "Let that one go. He's got too much spirit to be a steer." I suggested that we name him Bromden. "Yeah," Kesey said. "The Chief."
(Kesey, 2001, p. 7)

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The implications of this conversation—that to castrate a male is to take away the very essence of his being, or his “spirit”—reflects an argument about masculinity that pervades *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Kesey, 1962). In our current political climate, where foreign policy decisions often utilize a gendered rhetoric that seems to reflect an obsession with ensuring our national vitality and virility, Kesey’s criticism of a cold-war society that he believed fundamentally emasculated men strikes a chord in contemporary America. Randall P. McMurphy’s brief stint in a mental hospital, where he persuades the submissive male patients to rise up against ruthless, emasculating Nurse Ratched, is a story replete with issues of particular immediacy in contemporary America: heightened surveillance, the corruption of administration, the degradation of the individual, and a fundamental terror of perceived feminization.

For at least the first ten years of Ken Kesey’s literary career, his works seemed to reflect a belief in a stable self, an idea that resists most postmodern theory, which posits a decentered, unstable self and a dismantling of mythological structures—what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) called meta-narratives. Kesey’s fiction complicates Lyotard’s and similar arguments such as Suzanne Clark’s theory (2000) that the political environment of the 1950s undermined the 1940s era masculine warrior ethos. Instead, Kesey’s fiction *affirms* mythological structures, asserting or re-establishing masculine hero myths rather than rejecting or satirizing them like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut do. Likewise, the connection between masculinity and national identity made by theorists such as Susan Jeffords (1989) and Susan Rosowski (1999) conflicts with what Kesey envisions as American conformity and homogenization. Rather, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, we find a male identity alienated from national identity through a narrator who sees the psychiatric ward as “a factory ... for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches” (Kesey, 1962, p. 40). Kesey’s ideology, and the undercurrent of masculine virility in the novel, occupies a nebulous area that fails to fit into the most common artistic dichotomy of 20th Century literature: modernism or postmodernism. Existing at the crossroads of the sexual revolution, Kesey takes up a subversive position—one that offers a unique reaction to this perceived threat to masculinity commonly found in postwar literature. The sacrifice of McMurphy, his lobotomy at the end of the novel, opens a space in which Kesey’s narrator—fellow patient Chief Bromden, who is pretending to be a deaf-mute—undergoes an existential crisis regarding the self. In a particularly turbulent time in American history, where the Korean War and the Red Scare were overshadowed by the terrifying presence of atomic power, the novel’s conclusion seeks to reiterate or re-establish the individual as a destabilized identity.

Kinsey, Playboy and the Bomb: Witnessing Masculinity in the Cold War Fifties

The central argument of this essay posits that Kesey was one of a number of figures who formed a primal, virility-centered conception of masculinity as a subtle response to the political climate of the McCarthy era. Kesey’s fictional rebellion in the mental ward—his heroic characterization and victimization of the inmates and his anal-

ogous demonization of the institution and its representative, Nurse Ratched—responds to a cold war age of overwhelming surveillance and fear. The demeaning and callous nature of the administration's treatment of the inmates symbolizes a national government that, in Kesey's view, acted likewise. At Menlo Park, where Kesey worked as an orderly in the mid-1950s, he began to see a group of men alienated from a cold-war social system that destabilizes their sense of self. In an interview, Kesey explains that the experience gave him "a sense that maybe [the inmates] were not so crazy or as bad as the sterile environment they were living in" (quoted in Faggen, 1994, para. 36).

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, these themes of control, submission, and alienation link to gender, representing similar fears of female empowerment and a male power rendered impotent by a sterile social structure. In the postwar era, the discourse of gender and sexuality was, indeed, culturally linked to the political climate of surveillance. To authenticate identity often required what I will call witnessing—a third party who validates social membership by watching. This compulsion to legitimize identity via the other can be partially traced to McCarthyism, where thousands were either forced or felt compelled to declare that they were not "red" before a senatorial committee that bore witness. For the greater part of a decade, only through this committee could one's identity as patriot be truly rendered legitimate. Without this witnessing, one's status was always tentative, potentially in question and at risk, subject to alienation and punishment.

This culture of fear that pervaded the cultural landscape of the cold-war fifties took on homosexual and gender connotations. While McCarthy warned Americans that they were becoming "pink,"¹ Freudian theories that circulated widely in the decade similarly warned Americans that they were all latent homosexuals, and Alfred Kinsey's (et al., 1948/1998) *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* suggested that many more American men either performed homosexual acts or thought about performing homosexual acts. Kinsey's work undermined traditional notions of normative sexuality, contributing to a national obsession with homosexuality and placing sexual preference and performance at the forefront of the public's perception of manhood. Kinsey's theories mingled in the 1950s with figures as diverse as David Reisman and Hugh Hefner, who, in their own way, altered the discourse of masculinity in the 1950s and 1960s by participating in a cultural transformation, institutionalizing an over-sexualized conception of masculinity that privileges virility, sexual aggression, and sexual performance as the defining criteria for manhood.

The fiction of the 1950s and 1960s reflects this cultural phenomenon of the early Cold War, often featuring an angry defensive male figure who finds his manhood threatened and retaliates through a violent sexual act. Where modernist male heroes often

¹ Miriam Reumann (2005) points out that, "when liberals were denigrated as 'pink,' the term alluded to their insufficient masculinity as much as it did their alleged communist sympathies" (p. 68).

lacked sexual virility,² post-World War II writers tended to privilege virility and promote sexual and emotional release rather than restraint. Their characters are more animalistic, more virile and lustful, and increasingly antagonistic to a social network that is often portrayed as feminine or feminizing. James Dickey's *Deliverance* features this point of view, as does the work of Norman Mailer, and William Styron. The increased representation of violent sexual acts in their works is linked to an evolving masculine identity that re-emphasized an essentialist conception of gender, in which gender criteria are believed to be biologically determined rather than socially constructed, thus associating manhood with virility and a male need for sexual release.

Defining Gender and the Spectacle of Masculinity

My reading of post World War Two masculinity in this essay assumes that gender definitions are performative, fluid, and culturally formed, a concept influenced by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault but supported and complicated by many contemporary theorists. Butler famously pointed out that gender constitutes "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform the mode of belief" (Butler, 1997, p. 402), whereas Foucault (1990) suggests that sex entails power structures "put into discourse" (11). The body becomes the site of these power structures, a place of discourse itself. We enact identities that we envision as, culturally speaking, powerful or viable in our social environment of rewards and punishments.

Christina Jarvis (2004), much influenced by the work of Foucault, argues that gendered bodies exist "as historically and culturally located entities shaped not only by institutions such as schools, the military, and the media, but also by the fields that study them" (p. 7). Similarly, R. W. Connell (1995) points out that that body "is inescapable in the construction of masculinity," though "not fixed." Rather, Connell suggests that it enters "into the social process, becomes a part of history (both personal and collective) and a possible object of politics" (p. 56).³ Such views of gender as a primarily social, cultural, or historical are complicated by theorists such as James Catano (2001), for example, who calls masculinity "a rule governed practice performed and main-

² Michael Davidson (2004) observes, "The women *were* speaking of Michelangelo, as Prufrock ruefully observed, and as a consequence probably would not speak to him" (p. 20; emphasis in original).

³ Connell (1995) also discusses the link between gender and violence, suggesting that violence is used by men to "sustain their dominance" and exists as "a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions" in an attempt "to enforce a reactionary gender politics" (p. 83). However, I would like to complicate this notion by adding that violence is also related to gender identity formation. Violence, particularly sexual violence, becomes a statement or performance that is profoundly individual insofar as it is inextricably connected to anxieties and fears regarding gender identity. In that sense, violence becomes an individual's attempt to authenticate or legitimize individual identity.

tained—culturally and individually—through and in terms of preset rhetorical arguments” (p. 2), arguing that cultures use the rhetoric of myth to simultaneously create, reformulate, and reaffirm gender relationships.

However, I think it’s equally important to recognize the way in which the presence of an observer, an audience, greatly influences not only the gender performance itself, but also influences the concepts that define and determine the performance. When gender perceptions become in any way socially or historically contingent, establishing and validating ones identity becomes a spectator sport. Sexually speaking, then, the objective of the game becomes not simply to score, but rather to please the crowd.

In that sense, the presence of an audience forces gender performances to remain fluid and quickly transformative, depending on the perceived desires and fears of that audience. Stephen Meyer (2001) points out that men “fabricate a multiplicity of masculinities” which are “fashioned and refashioned” (p. 13). Meyer’s notion of “multiplicity” points to the importance of recognizing the way in which these gender performances are duplicitous, entailing a multiplicity of performances that not only cause us to “refashion” our sense of gender identity, but also to adopt different performances simultaneously. Just as Bakhtin argues for the multiplicity of our rhetorical choices—“he prays in one language, sings songs in another, speaks to his family in a third, and petitions the government in a fourth” (quoted in Steele, 1997, p. 32)—so too does our performance of gender change in front of different audiences.

Castration or Lobotomy? Male Choice on the Ward

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest features both a masculine hero who is able to transform his masculine performance in front of different audiences and a male patient (Billy Bibbit) who is encouraged to reassert his masculinity via sexual performance—a performance validated by the witnessing of the other patients, who laugh approvingly as they look on. That both these attempts fail, leading to Billy’s suicide and McMurphy’s lobotomy, confronts readers of Kesey’s novel with a fundamental choice that, for Kesey, reflects the crisis of masculinity in the postwar era: castration or lobotomy. The men who repress their sexuality, and consequently their innate masculinity are psychologically castrated, whereas the rest are sacrificed.

These issues of male sexuality are invoked as early as the opening of the novel, where the narrator announces that “[b]lack boys in white suits ... commit sex acts in the hall (Kesey, 1962, p. 9), indicating that sexual release must be obtained subversively. After the first Group Therapy meeting, the persecution of the patients becomes linked to castration, where McMurphy immediately implicates Nurse Ratched, calling her “a bitch and a buzzard and a ballcutter” (p. 58), then adding,

[T]he best way ... to get you to knuckle under is to weaken you by gettin’ you where it hurts the worst ... go for your vitals. And that’s what the old buzzard is doing, going for your vitals. (p. 57)

McMurphy's fear of castration here is both gendered and specific to the ward. According to McMurphy, the men's vitals are in danger and Nurse Ratched wields the knife. McMurphy, who directly associates psychological power with sexual power, sees his "vitals" as the core of his masculine power. McMurphy's reference to her as an "old Buzzard" subtly besmirches feminine power as something degrading and shameful—residing at the bottom of the food chain, feeding off of dead carcasses. Furthermore, Kesey implies that, under the guise of this feminine power, masculine identity can only exist in a decayed and rotting state.

At the same time, it's important to recognize the way in which the danger to masculine sexuality does not reside solely in the aggressive feminine force. Rather, Nurse Ratched encompasses a larger social system. McMurphy says, "I've seen a thousand of 'em, old and young, men and women. Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes—people who try to make you weak ..." (p. 57). Contemporary life itself becomes something that weakens men by "getting [them] where it hurts the worst."

Instead, the evil force in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is what Bromden calls "the combine," the systematic societal machine that transforms women into cold unfeeling robots like Ratched and men into submissive rabbits like Harding. In that sense, Kesey creates a ward that he sees as a microcosm for a society that systematically castrates men by suppressing their sexual impulse. Again, Kesey's critique of a feminizing postwar culture parallels similar national concerns. In an era where many Americans worried about an emasculating nation state, Kesey's own reaction roughly coincided with a common national reaction, in which Americans embraced a bolder sexually aggressive, promiscuous, heterosexual male.

Indeed, the patients on Nurse Ratched's ward—a representation of an American culture that has allowed men's sexual impulses to be repressed—have all failed somehow in their sexual exploits. In Group Therapy, for example, Harding's marital problems begin to have sexual implications when we discover that he "may give her reason to seek further sexual attention" elsewhere (p. 43). Harding has been thoroughly feminized by the women around him, and is described by Bromden as "too pretty to just be a guy on the street" with "hands so long and white and dainty" (p. 23). Likewise, Billy's obsession with his mother prevents him from having relationships with other women. When Billy reveals his plans to marry someday, his mother laughs at the idea, telling him, "Sweetheart, you still have scads of time for things like that" (p. 247). Indeed, we find that almost all of the patients are on the ward because of troubled relationships with women. As Ruckly, another chronic patient whom Bromden tells us the staff has "fixed" (p. 15), wanders around the ward yelling "Fffffffuck da wife" (p. 16), his antagonism seems to be symbolic of the entire ward. Even the male staffers that work in the ward find themselves emasculated, seemingly by the very presence of Nurse Ratched. Bromden describes the common complaint of doctors after they have been on the ward for a while: "Since I started on that ward with that woman I feel like my veins are running ammonia. I shiver all the time, my kids won't sit in my lap, my wife won't sleep with me..." (p. 27).

In this way, the ward becomes characterized as a sexual desert, full of decaying men with increased sexual problems and who are consistently characterized by the narrator as feminine. We are told the men gossip, giggle, and “snicker in their fists” (p. 19). The predominant feature of this feminization becomes submissiveness, a trait that can be seen in Kesey’s description of the inmates while working at the psychiatric ward in Menlo Park. In a letter to Ken Babbs, for example, Kesey describe the patients as submissive and childlike, calling them “infants growing backwards, away from civilization and rationalization, back to complete dependence, to darkness, the womb, the seed ...” (Kesey, 1973, pp. 339-340). Later in this letter, Kesey sexualizes this dependence, saying, “Some you don’t know by name, only by the number of times you have to shuck down their pajamas and swab out their mustard-colored crotches ... or by the length of his rootlike cock as you tape on a catheter tube” (p. 341).

While this tendency toward submissiveness and dependency is common to all the inmates, it culminates in Tabor’s rape by the male attendants in the shower. This scene of domination entirely feminizes Tabor, who is described as having “a peach colored rear ... framed by the lettuce green” clothing (Kesey, 1962, p. 36). After Nurse Ratched’s act of penetration, injecting Tabor with the medicine he refused to take, we are told the attendants are “in there a long time before the door opens up again and they come out.” Tabor’s “greens are ripped clear off now and he’s wrapped in a damp sheet” (p. 37). Although only one such scene occurs in the novel, we are told they occur regularly, known of and permitted by Nurse Ratched.

Kesey contrasts such victimized males with Bromden’s overt masculinization of McMurphy. According to the Chief, McMurphy is “big” and he “talks like papa ... loud and full of hell” (p. 16). In addition, McMurphy’s sideburns, his devilish grin, and his iron-heeled boots give him a tough John Wayne persona that encourages readers to associate him with hard masculinity:

He’s got on work-farm pants and shirt, sunned out till they’re the color of watered milk. His face and neck and arms are the color of oxblood leather from working long in the fields. He’s got a primer-black motorcycle cap stuck in his hair and a leather jacket over one arm, and he’s got on boots gray and dusty and heavy enough to kick a man in two. (p. 17)

As here, the Chief’s impressions of McMurphy always emphasize strength and toughness, positing a working man’s body with a rough exterior. McMurphy’s body is hard, “kind of the way a baseball is hard under the scuffed leather” (p. 16).

Furthermore, McMurphy’s sexual potency is emphasized from the very first Group Therapy meeting, where we find out McMurphy is a sexual predator, having been convicted of statutory rape. McMurphy’s defense specifically reveals his own sexual power: “she was plenty willin’ ... so willin’, in fact, that I took to sewing my pants shut” (p. 45). That is, McMurphy’s sexual drive becomes his own defense, implying that short of “sewing [his] pants shut,” there is nothing a man can do to stop himself. That is, the male sexual impulse cannot be controlled, to the point where he suggests that she “would of actually burnt me to a frazzle” (p. 45).

When McMurphy, represents the masculine ideal in the novel because of his virile power, discovers that his file indicates “repeated outbreaks of passion” (Kesey, 1962, p. 46), he mocks the possibility that being “overzealous in ... sexual relations” is a serious problem. McMurphy’s character, centered on his sexuality, is dependent on other’s perception on him as an overly sexual being.

Good Women and Whores: Feminine Sexuality and Empowerment

Without sexual license, the novel seems to argue, the masculine self cannot cope with the feminine other. Indeed, Bromden’s descriptions of Ratched point to a fear of the nurse shared by most of the acute patients, particularly when the Chief catches a glimpse of what he takes to be the Nurse’s “hideous real self” (Kesey, 1962, p. 11). Bromden’s description, in which “she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor” (p. 11), indicates a terror of the nurse that recurs numerous times in the novel. Harding’s admission in Group Therapy that “his wife’s ample bosom ... gives him a feeling of inferiority” (p. 44) seems to function in a similar way. In the face of his own sexual impotency, Harding cannot help but subordinate himself to a female sexual power that intimidates him. Conversely, the prostitutes of the novel exist in a purely sexual way, making them less terrifying, and, in that sense, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* seems to privilege Candy and Ginger *because* they are prostitutes. Their sexual availability encourages men to release their innate sexuality. Unlike the prostitutes, Nurse Ratched hides her enormous breasts, represses her feminine sexuality, which the novel seems to disapprove of.

Kesey struggled with feminism throughout his life. Years after *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Kesey confessed to having been disturbed by lesbian feminist Robin Morgan’s lecture that ridiculed his work, arguing that “to be a real Ken Kesey-type man, one should slap dumb women” (Kesey, 1967, p. 189). Kesey admits that “even though she insulted me a lot ... taking issue with my virility ... there wasn’t one of us watching that didn’t know down under our pricked pride that the freedoms Ms. Morgan was frightening us with were as much to man’s benefit as to woman’s” (Kesey, 1967, p. 189). In that sense, the terror of the male patients in the *Cuckoo’s Nest* ward seems to parallel Kesey’s own struggle to confront a new postwar feminist force. Like his characters, Kesey is faced with an unsettling, aggressive female figure in power.

The antagonism in the novel toward feminine power—a mysterious and alluring force that inevitably proves destructive to men—can be better understood in the context of the postwar era, where women in numerous sectors of the economy refused to return to the home when men returned from World War Two. As Joanne Meyerowitz’s (1994) collection aptly demonstrates, The fifties was, for women, a period of increased independence and rising feminism, a trend that Kesey’s work seems to recognize. Furthermore, Kesey’s work represents a larger cultural fear that, as women move into more powerful positions, men will become emasculated.

However, Kesey’s reaction to Robin Morgan’s accusations also implies a defense of masculine sexuality. That is, Kesey sees a “revolutionary ally” (Kesey, 1967, p. 189)

in spite of her “taking issue with [his] virility” (p. 189) adding, “I’m still man enough not to let a couple of catty comments distract me” (p. 189). Likewise, underneath McMurphy’s gambling persona lies a sexuality that Kesey envisions as inextricably linked to masculine existence. This aspect of masculine identity is *not* performative for Kesey, but rather is a fundamental part of man’s nature. The black boys at the beginning of the novel who committed sex acts in the halls support this idea that male identity is centered in sexual release. The novel thus suggests that men who do not have an outlet for their masculine sex drive will go mad ... will cease to be men ... will become Harding.

For McMurphy to retain his masculinity, then, some sexual act needs to be performed, a sexual conquest must be attained. Because the other patients’ essential lack is a sexual outlet, McMurphy believes that satisfying this masculine sex drive will provide a resolution—will liberate them once again. When McMurphy asks for vitamins from one of the nurses, saying he’s “getting’ them for Billy Boy” (Kesey, 1962, p. 280), he subtly denigrates Billy’s sexual virility while also implying that a sexual and psychological awakening is coming. McMurphy tells the nurse that Billy “seems to have a peaked look of late” and adds, “I thought I’d wait till about midnight when he’d have the most need for them” (p. 280). At first, it seems as if sneaking Candy on to the ward will satisfy this sexual urge, as McMurphy’s sexual innuendo suggests: “[T]hey checked my plugs and cleaned my points, and I got a glow on like a Model T spark coil” (p. 244). At the same time, it is assumed that the opportunity to “cash in [Billy’s] cherry” (p. 245) will make a man out of him. Even Turkle, the night watchman, seems to approve of McMurphy’s intent, willing to let the prostitutes into the ward so long as he gets to satisfy his sexual desires as well. “You people be sharing more’n a bottle, won’t you” (p. 283), Turkle asks with a grin.

In a very important way, however, sexual acts with Candy and Ginger cannot suffice. These are not the female figures that terrorize McMurphy and the ward. Rather, McMurphy must retain his masculinity by confronting the female figure of power. McMurphy must rape Nurse Ratched. Thus, when McMurphy finally attacks Nurse Ratched toward the end of the novel, nearly killing her, it symbolically (but also in a disturbingly literal way) represents a sexual assault. Sexual restraint and denial culminate here, in an act in which violence and sexuality converge:

After he’d smashed through that glass door, her face swinging around, with terror forever ruining any other look she might ever try to use again, screaming when he grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light. (p. 267)

Violence itself becomes a kind of sex act here—one that drains Nurse Ratched of her power and transforms her from the cold mother figure into the prostitute. McMurphy exposes her feminine sexuality, revealing the “two nipples” — a literal transformation here from a cold machine to something more vulnerable, something “warm and

pink.” In addition, McMurphy transfers the terror that Nurse Ratched inspired in the patients into terror that Nurse Ratched herself feels.

Nurse Ratched’s fear empowers the men, but the result is not particularly satisfying. By exposing Ratched, McMurphy essentially exposes himself as the evasive calf whom Kesey described as having “too much spirit to be a steer.” Because Ratched is simply a cog in a larger social system that feminizes men, McMurphy’s act was a sacrificial one, and the ensuing lobotomy of McMurphy offers us a succinct and powerful metaphor for Kesey’s vision of the masculine condition. Men who cannot properly repress their sexual urges in this new environment will inevitably be sacrificed. Those that cannot be castrated will indeed be lobotomized. In this way, McMurphy’s sacrificial lobotomy allows Bromden to see that he too is faced with a choice. Bromden observes during shock therapy, “They got the dice loaded to throw a snake eyes ... and I’m the load” (p. 240), suggesting a metaphor for his future, both culturally and in terms of gender. Playing the game entails putting himself in a losing position—inevitably crapping out.

Note, however, that either scenario entails the danger of castration. To remain in the ward, safe from a feminizing society, is to go the way of McMurphy or Harding. On the other hand, to escape the ward means escaping Nurse Ratched’s knife, but requires facing an emasculating society. For Bromden, gender identity combines with cultural identity, and to re-establish both, Bromden must confront the cultural system that oppresses him. That is, Bromden must face a civilization that he has spent the novel fleeing. In that sense, Bromden’s escape, as well as the physical act of lifting the tub to break the window and escape the ward, becomes a symbolic act—an assertion of his masculine self. In addition, Bromden describes the event in religious terms, saying that “the glass splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth” (p. 310), giving the act an almost spiritual meaning.

Kesey’s ending here is not simply an assertion of masculine freedom, but instead a much more ambiguous, and perhaps even pessimistic move. By essentially ending the novel in the ward, Kesey refuses to allow the reader to witness the success or failure of the patients in the outside world. To end in this manner indicates Kesey’s refusal to provide a resolution where he sees none existing. Rather, Kesey sees masculinity as still very much endangered here.

This refusal on Kesey’s part to resolve the gender issues he has presented says much about his perception of masculinity in a world of McCarthy hearings and atom bombs. On one hand, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* can be interpreted as a knee-jerk reaction to an increasingly aggressive feminist force, and a perceived loss of masculine empowerment (by modernization as much as femininity). However, it’s important to recognize that works like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* were catalysts for the sexual revolution of the 1960s. After Kesey published it, he started a counter-culture movement that lasted well over a decade. The free love hippie movement that exploded in the late 1960s had some of its seedlings planted here, in characters like McMurphy, who advocates open sexuality and freedom of sexual expression. This ideology defined Kesey’s early career, locating the masculine self in a primal, instinctual sexual drive that he believed men impulsively seek to satisfy.

In any period of high-capitalism, identity itself becomes a consumable product, a commodity to be marketed, bought, and sold. The sexualizing of heterosexual masculinity in the fiction, film, and magazines of the period commodified a masculine identity that could cope with perceived threats of homosexuality. Ken Kesey combined with figures like Norman Mailer, Hugh Hefner, and Ian Fleming, all of whom created masculine personas that offered the American public the possibility of avoiding being labeled “pink,” by taking up acts deemed heterosexual. Exhibiting an open, exaggerated sexuality became an opportunity to validate one’s heterosexuality. Conversely, to not participate in the sexual rhetoric of Joe McCarthy, Mickey Spillane, and Ian Fleming was to potentially render oneself unmanly.

This seems especially prevalent today, where globalization would seem to further increase the commodification of the individual. American culture today is inundated with sexuality, where masculinity has become an industry unto itself and where, perhaps more than ever before in American history, sexual behavior marks one’s identity. Signs and symbols encouraging sexual expression surround us, and men’s magazines from the fifties, such as *Playboy* and *Esquire*, have spawned a hundred others. In that sense, Kesey’s work exhibits a masculinity that can perhaps help us understand the obsession with masculine sexual virility and violence in our own time, a new age in which male sexuality has become, like so many other things, a product of conspicuous consumption.

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